Scribal Error in Biblical Manuscripts

Since the reproduction of manuscripts in the ancient world required individual hand copying by scribes, the transmission of texts was often liable to corruption. By examining the different manuscripts of a particular passage, textual critics are able to discern the common errors. Since extant manuscripts of biblical texts, specifically the New Testament, exist in such a great number, they are a good place to look for scribal errors. The following is a list of common types of scribal errors one may encounter in these manuscripts:

Unintentional Errors

1. Confusing similarly shaped letters: Some letters in the Greek alphabet were easy to confuse when handwritten. For example, the round letters epsilon (ϵ), theta (Θ), omicron (O), and sigma (C) all have similar shapes.

Alpha (A), delta (Δ), and lambda (Λ) all have triangular shapes and were sometimes confused.

Sometimes two letters written closely together were mistaken for one letter. For instance, a tau followed by an iota (TI) could end up looking like a pi (Π); a lambda followed by an iota (ΛI) could look like a nu (N).

2. Dittography and haplography: These terms describe errors that result in repeating text or omitting text. They frequently occur when a word, phrase, or line begins with a similar string of letters (homoeoarcton) or ends with a similar string of letters (homoeoteleuton), causing the eyes to skip forward or backward. One example of haplography resulting from homoeoteleuton can be found in Matt. 5:19-20 of the Codex Sinaiticus.* The first sentence of verse 19 ends with ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν and the end of the verse also ends with ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν. Thus, the scribe of the Codex Sinaiticus has accidentally omitted everything from the first occurrence to the end of the verse. The scribe of the Codex Bezae has gone even further by skipping from the end of the first sentence of verse 19 to the end of verse 20 which also ends with ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν.

3. Confusing similar sounding letters: Sometimes scribes would write from dictation or would read the words aloud to themselves while copying. The blog post “Papyrus as Evidence of Linguistic Change,” has already presented some of the changes in pronunciation that occured in the Greek language over time which often resulted in spelling variations. This is evident in many biblical papyri as scribes who relied on hearing often mixed up similar sounding diphthongs and vowels of that period. One excellent example of this confusion can be found in Rom. 5:1 where the manuscript evidence is quite equally divided between ἔχομεν and ἔχωμεν.

4. Word substitions: Errors could also occur when scribes trying to retain a line in their memory accidentally replaced some words with close synonyms. Prepositions like ἐκ and ἀπό, or conjunctions like ὅτι and διότι are some examples of synonyms which mistakenly get replaced.

5. Transposition of words: Sometimes scribes would unintentionally reorder a string of words, especially if the sense of the phrase remained virtually the same. This is another type of error related to faulty memory.

6. Assimilation of marginalia: Some manuscripts contained notes or glosses in the margins from earlier scribes. These notes sometimes found their way into the actual text of the manuscript.

Intentional Changes

1. Harmonization: The wording of a particular phrase or sentence was sometimes altered to reflect the wording of another similar but more familiar one. This was especially common with quotations that had a longer form in a different book or quotations from the Septuagint that did not conform to the exact wording of the Septuagint.

2. Conflation of readings: Conflation tended to happen more often in biblical manuscripts than elsewhere. A scribe would sometimes make his copy using more than one manuscript. Where the wording of the exemplars differed from each other, a scribe would sometimes conflate both readings into one.

3. Grammatical adjustments: Although the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the rise of Atticism in the 2nd century AD led scribes to try to improve the style of a text. Other times, they would tend to make slight adjustments to improve clunky grammar. A good illustration of the tendency to correct can be found in Mark 1:37 which reads, "καὶ εὗρον αὐτὸν καὶ λέγουσιν." One variant occurring in a majority of manuscripts attempts to improve the grammar with the following: "καὶ εὕροντες αὐτὸν λέγουσιν."

Bibliography:

Aland, Kurt and Barbara. 1989. *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and To the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism.* Translated by Erroll F. Rhodes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Ehrman, Bart D. and Metzger, Bruce M. 2005. *The Text of the New Testament.* Oxford University Press.

Metzger, Bruce M. 2005. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, London: United Bible Societies.

*For more information about the codices Sinaiticus and Bezae, see

http://codexsinaiticus.org/en/codex/ and

http://legacy.earlham.edu/~seidti/iam/tc_codexb.html